

EFPP Large Group

What is a Large Group?

A 'Large Group' refers to a gathering of people—typically ranging from twenty-five to several hundred—that exceeds the size at which a group can function through the face-to-face familiarity characteristic of the small group. Where the small group allows members to track each individual's contribution and personality, the large group forces a different mode of relating: one mediated less by personal recognition and more by shared themes, roles, and unconscious currents that move through the collective.

Origins and Key Contributors

The systematic study of large groups emerged from group-analytic and group-relations traditions in the 1950s – 1970s. S.H. Foulkes had already proposed that the group functions as a "matrix"—a network of communication and relationship within which individual minds are nodes rather than isolated units. Applied to the large group, this matrix becomes harder to perceive directly, since no single member can hold the whole of it in mind.

Pat de Mare extended this thinking significantly, describing the large group as a "median group"—a space situated between the intimacy of the small group and the impersonality of society at large. De Mare argued that the large group has a unique capacity to metabolize hate and prejudice into something he called "koinonia": a form of impersonal fellowship or citizenship that arises from thinking together about difference, rather than merely tolerating it.

Pierre Turquet, working from the Tavistock tradition, offered a more sobering account. He described the large group's typical experience as one of loss: loss of identity, loss of the sense of being heard, and a pull toward primitive, undifferentiated states of mind. Turquet's large group is often marked by anxiety, fragmentation, and a struggle against the feeling of psychic disappearance into the mass.

Characteristic Dynamics

Dedifferentiation: individuality becomes harder to sustain; members may feel merged with, or lost in, the collective.

Regression: large groups can activate more primitive anxieties and defences than small groups, echoing Bion's basic-assumption phenomena (dependency, fight-flight, pairing) and Hopper's Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification structure, in a more diffuse, harder-to-locate forms.

Oscillation: movement between chaotic, fragmented states and moments of genuine collective thought (koinonia).

The role of the "voice": individuals often speak not simply as themselves but as carriers of a theme circulating in the group, making interpretation of "who is speaking" less straightforward than in small groups.

Clinical and Social Relevance

Large groups appear not only in dedicated large-group psychotherapy or training events but as an implicit dimension of institutions, conferences, and communities—anywhere a collective exceeds face-to-face scale. Understanding large-group dynamics has practical value for facilitators of organizational events, academic conferences, and community interventions, since unacknowledged large-group anxiety can undermine even well-designed structures.

The concept also carries a broader social resonance: the large group is sometimes read as a laboratory for phenomena relevant to society, nationalism, and intergroup conflict—making it a natural point of contact between clinical group analysis and social theory.

The History of the EFPP Large Group

The online Large Group organized by the European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (EFPP) was initiated by Dr. Gila Ofer, who addressed the EFPP during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and proposed the gathering as a space for members to come together during a period of acute collective disruption. A further large-group event was convened in March 2022 intended to give members a shared space to process the war in Ukraine, which had affected many colleagues directly and all of them implicitly.

Because both the pandemic-era and Ukraine-related large groups proved meaningful for many participants, the EFPP board decided to establish a continuous Large Group as an ongoing space for members and associates to connect, meeting every few weeks on Thursday evenings, 20:00–21:30 CET, via Zoom. The ninety-minute sessions have been convened by Gila Ofer, who initiated the project, together with Uri Levin (both from Israel and former chairs of the EFPP Groups' section).

The EFPP Large Group illustrates several of the theoretical themes discussed above translated into a specific, sustained institutional practice. Originating as a response to acute, shared external crises—first a pandemic, then a war—it has evolved from a crisis intervention into a standing structure, suggesting that the large group's function is not limited to containing acute disruption but can also serve an ongoing, "median group" role: sustaining a European-wide professional community, holding space for members' differing national and political positions, and offering a recurring opportunity to think together about experiences that no single national or clinical context can fully contain alone.